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Allison Heerwagen

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storytelling Through Play: Toys & Their Tales

Allison Heerwagen

Children bring folktales to life by playing with toys. Their toys tell stories that teach us about their culture. Children’s toys are a reflection of their culture’s history and values.

Play After Wartime

During involvement in World War II, the Japanese movie industry focused on wartime and serving the country. The character Godzilla was a product of a return to a focus on purely entertainment (Allison 2006: 6). One example of this resurgence is Toho Studios’ *Gojira* (1954). This film tells the story of a giant ancient amphibious monster being stirred awake by American nuclear testing. The testing turned the previously-hibernating monster into a hybrid dinosaur-nuclear weapon. This story spins real-life events into fantasy; viewers at the time could relate and held strong emotions about it despite the monster being imagined (Allison 2006: 7).



Gojira film still © Toho Co. Ltd.

Mechagodzilla toy (VCL at VCU #4913)

Gojira serves as an example of historical events and cultural context in Japan having a major impact on storytelling and the entertainment industry. Toys created during this time were not only a reflection of the storyline but real-life events and their cultural impact. The events that took place in World War II between Japan and the United States of America, among other countries, influenced the stories that children would use to animate and characterize their toys (Allison 2006: 5-7). Those who lived through wartime as young children were able to translate their own life experiences into play with this story and subsequent toys.

There have been many reinterpretations of this story resulting in a variation of toys produced. The subsequent film adaptation came from the United States as *Godzilla*, *King of the Monsters* (1956). This is how the familiar name came to be popular on a global scale and pushed the sales of Godzilla toys worldwide. The original Japanese story was inspiration for the creation of each toy model as well as new aspects of the story. The Mechagodzilla toy is a product of a reimagined character and the combination of various cultural influences. Children are free to play with the original or the newest adaptation in mind, from any age or era.

Toys and Television

Many toys were the product of the entertainment industry, including Gumby. This bendable posable toy got his start as a clay character created for Art Clokey’s 1950s *Gumbasia* short film. Gumby’s success and later production as a toy followed the rise of television and the character’s star spot on *The Howdy Doody Show*. The popularity of the toy mirrored the success of television programming.

A new age of technology in the United States during the 1940s and ‘50s brought television programming to wealthy households. As it became more accessible, television began to have an importance to the American family in their day-to-day life and was a major marketing tool. A rise in children’s programming led to the production of toys that could be sold. A product of popular media, Gumby was quickly turned into a profitable physical toy character that children could hold and animate.

Gumby’s appeal was in part due to the magic and fantasy that claymation provided. Children could use



Imitation Gumby from George Washington’s Mount Vernon (VCL at VCU #2166)

play as a way to escape from their own environment and engage in another storyline with fantastical characters (Jovchelovitch, Priego-Hernández, and Glaveanu 2017: 8). They could utilize existing stories of Gumby and his friends during play and build off of them with their own experiences and imagination (Woodyer 2010: 18). Toys like Gumby serve as tools for children to recontextualize their experiences, resulting in a deeper understanding of their own environment, and creatively imagine beyond that.

Lessons Taught With Toys

The story of Frozen Charlotte has taken on many forms since a poem “A Corpse Going to a Ball” and ballad “Young Charlotte” was written by Seba Smith and popularized by William Lorenzo Carter (Lord 1966). Charlotte is characterized to be a “vain and strong-willed maiden who insisted on going to a dance against her mother’s advice and met her death on a frigid Maine night” (Bennett 2012: 271). This nineteenth-century story inspired the creation of poems, songs, dolls, and even a dessert recipe.

“The mother to her daughter said, ‘These blankets round you fold; For it is a dreadful night, you know, You’ll catch your death of cold.’ ‘Oh, no! Oh, no!’ the darling cried, She laughed like a gypsy queen, ‘For to ride in blankets muffled up, I never could be seen.’”

Lyrics of “Young Charlotte” North American ballad written by Seba Smith

The Frozen Charlotte porcelain doll served as a physical reminder for children to heed their parents’ warnings as they play. The toy is a reflection of cultural standards of children-parent relationships and how the family unit was expected to operate at the time. The fear instituted by storytelling and this particular warning of choosing fashion over physical health could be used to enforce cultural practices and expectations. Children are aware of these expectations as they play and reenact the story.



Frozen Charlotte from Washington D.C., late 19th or early 20th c. (VCL at VCU #1060)

This doll was affordable and accessible to groups outside its intended upper-middle class European-American audience. Children of cultures that did not support the views of the poem and ballad still had access to this toy for play. Examples of these groups include Native Americans living on reservations and Chinese immigrants (Vann 2018: 2). Fragments of this particular doll were found at archeological sites associated with these communities. Children of many backgrounds played with this doll with their own associations and stories. They were able to play beyond limitations of the European-American perspective (Vann 2018: 3). For many, it became a vehicle for a wide range of stories that incorporated their own personal culture and experiences into play.

Ice Age Animals: Imaginative Play



Plastic mammoth (VCL at VCU #2949)

Plastic woolly rhino (VCL at VCU #2950)

Both the woolly rhinoceros and mammoth have been extinct for at least 4,000 years. These ice age animals were the giants of the Pleistocene Epoch, which began around 2.6 million years ago. Some animals from this era are still alive today, like star-nosed moles and muskoxen (Levy 2011: 195), but the woolly rhinoceros and mammoth are now extinct.

Toys made in the image of these creatures are played with by children who have never seen them firsthand, so they must use other information to tell their story (Jovchelovitch, Priego-Hernández, and Glaveanu 2017: 4). They draw from fragments of information they’ve encountered about archaeology and more. Children use cultural, scientific, and historical cues to make these toys characters in a story.

The last ice age was also a period of development for early humans, who altered the planet and were able to dominate the land the giant ice age animals left behind (Levy 2011: 16). These humans communicated their direct observations of the animals in the form of cave paintings. Learning from these paintings is another way children can better understand how these animals lived, giving them more “life” in play.

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